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SUBJECT: VIRUNGA PARK REPORT: TENTATIVE AGREEMENT BY REBEL GROUP TO MAINTAIN CONSERVATION EFFORTS IN THE GORILLA SECTOR

REF:

¶1. (SBU) Summary. Following renewed fighting in North Kivu in October, 2008, park rangers have returned to Virunga park and in particular to the Mikeno sector, home of the approximately 200 mountain gorillas in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC). Laurent Nkunda's rebel National Congress of the Defense of the People (CNDP) force currently controls a large area of the Virunga park, including Mikeno. The park rangers' situation is tenuous, based on negotiations between the Congolese conservation authority (ICCN) representative for Virunga park and CNDP. Surprisingly, these unarmed rangers include a mix of CNDP-friendly rangers and rangers loyal to the Kinshasa government. A census of the gorilla population is currently underway to provide updated information on the numbers of gorillas in Mikeno. CNDP is reported to be charging admission for gorilla visits to journalists traveling to the park, though ICCN reports that this has been only in limited cases and is not part of a wider CNDP effort to generate income through access to the gorilla population. While the return of park rangers to Virunga represents a significant victory for ICCN, the widespread instability and ongoing fighting in the region continue to pose a direct threat to the mountain gorillas and conservation efforts in general. End Summary

CNDP controls gorilla sector of Virunga park

¶2. (U) The Virunga park, a roughly 8,000 square kilometer area located in North Kivu and Orientale Provinces in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) is one of the world's most significant reserves of biodiversity. In particular, Virunga is home to approximately one third of the world's remaining population of mountain gorillas, which are concentrated in a 250 square kilometer area of Virunga park known as the Mikeno sector. When fighting in October, 2008 led to forces under the control of Laurent Nkunda (CNDP) taking control of a significant portion of Virunga park, including Mikeno, park rangers were forced to flee the area. Between October 29-31, more than 50 rangers working in Virunga fled the park, eventually gathering in Goma to establish a makeshift temporary camp along with hundreds of thousands of other internally-displaced Congolese. Nkunda's forces had been in control of the Mikeno sector since before the recent push in October 2008, and according to reports some rangers thought to be more in step with Nkunda's forces stayed throughout the recent siege.

¶3. (U) The renewed fighting in Virunga park was cause for great alarm among conservation groups. While CNDP had previously used Virunga as a base of operations, they had not up until this time seized control of the park's headquarters. Emmanuel De Merode, the Belgian national named in August 2008 to be the Congolese Institute for the Conservation of Nature (ICCN's) Director and Chief of Site for the Virunga Park, wrote that "Fighting [...] has now totally engulfed the park station and our Rangers have been forced to flee into the forests for their lives. The rebels now are the only occupants of the park station at Rumangabo."

Park rangers gain negotiated access to Virunga

¶4. (U) A USAID representative met with De Merode and ICCN Virunga Communications Director Samantha Newport on December 3 to get a briefing on the current situation in Virunga, particularly with regard to the gorilla population. According to De Merode and Newport, their efforts to negotiate with CNDP representatives were successful in allowing for the return of over 50 park rangers and their families to the Virunga park's headquarters at Rumangabo and gorilla area in Mikeno district. In all likelihood, De Merode's Belgian nationality was a key consideration in CNDP's decision to allow the rangers to return to the park. Not being Congolese, De Merode does not have any affiliation with a particular Congolese political or ethnic structure, and so his motives can be more directly understood to be solely in protection of Virunga's wildlife, particularly the highly endangered gorilla population. De Merode remains highly concerned about the situation, describing the rangers' position as tenuous.

¶5. (SBU) The fact that CNDP has allowed a group of men of fighting age and condition access to the park, within CNDP areas of control, is a very positive development but by no means guaranteed to last. In response to the question of whether ICCN was working with CNDP to get rangers back into the park, De Merode clarified that ICCN had gained CNDP's 'permission' to re-enter the park. Significantly, De Merode noted that the rangers included a 'mixage' of rangers sympathetic to CNDP along with others loyal to the government in Kinshasa. The term 'mixage' is noteworthy in that it makes specific reference to the process of military integration that Laurent Nkunda negotiated for his troops in 2006 which would have permitted them,

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unlike other armed groups going through the process of military integration, to remain in North Kivu province and under his control.

If the reference was meant to suggest that the park rangers were being forged into an integrated force, which the original mixage process was meant to create, it would be a change from the previous situation in which only forces loyal to Nkunda were allowed to remain in the areas of the park under CNDP control and benefit to some degree from the limited tourism revenues that were generated. Whether De Merode continues to maintain the confidence of both the Congolese government and the CNDP - a tightrope act that for the time being is producing results - remains to be seen.

¶6. (U) The return of rangers to Virunga allows certain conservation efforts to resume for the gorilla population. A census of the gorilla population is underway for the last week, which will be the first gorilla census completed since August 2007. During the 2007 census, a total of 72 habituated and 120 non-habituated gorillas were counted in the area, providing the basis for the estimate that the DRC is home to approximately one third of the world's mountain gorilla population. The census will take between 3 and 4 weeks to complete and will seek to identify every individual gorilla in the park.

ICCN "Lurching from crisis to crisis"

¶7. (U) Aside from armed conflict in the park, Virunga is still menaced by the charcoal trade which represents the most important single threat to the park's long-term sustainability. With very little forest around or outside the park, and very few economic opportunities available in the area, there are few alternatives to the local population for production of charcoal other than cutting trees inside the park. Charcoal is a lucrative commodity in the area, with a bag commanding between \$20-25 on the market in Goma. Estimates of overall production indicate that charcoal represents a \$30 million per year industry in the area. Astonishingly, ICCN indicated that they understand that local families can spend up to 80 percent of household income on fuel, meaning that there is intense demand for charcoal production and few available substitutes. Last year Rwanda generated \$6 million in tourism revenues from gorillas, which suggests that sustainability is possible in the DRC if and only if the gorillas can be managed as a

valuable resource and generate income for the local population. Past experience with gorilla tourism in the DRC included insufficient revenue sharing provisions and other development opportunities for local communities. Last year's killing of 7 mountain gorillas in Virunga, which captured worldwide attention, shows the dire consequences for the DRC's gorilla population when they are seen to stand in the way of the livelihoods of the local population and economic interests of political and military officials profiting from the charcoal trade.

¶8. (U) Poaching also presents an ongoing threat to wildlife in the Virunga park, though it has been focused primarily on other large mammal species including elephant and hippopotamus. With three armed militia groups in and around the Virunga park, pressure for meat from the forest is intense. Virunga's hippopotamus population, in particular, is seriously threatened by poaching. The estimated 700 remaining hippos are a fraction of the over 20,000 which were in Virunga 20 years ago. Poaching of the hippo and elephant populations dramatically increased in 2007 and is understood to be ongoing and driven by armed groups operating in the area.

¶9. (SBU) Conclusions: Given the tenuous situation with regard to ICCN rangers' access to the Virunga park, it will be important to keep an eye on the situation but to tread very carefully when discussing the situation with the GDRC. It is remarkable that De Merode has been able to achieve the return of rangers to the park, and ensuring that gorilla protection efforts are not subsumed by a political agenda on either the CNDP or GDRC side of the conflict is the most positive outcome that can be hoped for. With regard to development assistance, developing sustainable alternative fuel sources is the most critical factor in reducing charcoal production and associate habitat degradation. The USG should consider increased investment in biodiversity conservation efforts in Virunga that target reduction of cutting in the forest, provide alternatives to charcoal from Virunga as the primary fuel source in the area, and establish other livelihoods options for the local population. Until an end to conflict in the area allows for development of a viable tourism sector urgent consideration should be given to how to help the local population earn a living without resorting to charcoal production in critical areas.

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